

National Security

‘Let the Americans help her now’: New documents released on attack that killed reporter in Syria

By **Dana Priest** April 9 at 7:15 PM

As the explosions grew closer, the reporters and activists working at a clandestine media center in the Syrian city of Homs decided it was time to evacuate. American reporter Marie Colvin and a photographer were steps from the exit when a rocket hit, instantly killing them both.

The Syrian general who allegedly planned and executed [the 2012 attack](#) in retaliation for Colvin’s reporting congratulated his men with an impromptu party when he heard the news.

“Marie Colvin was a dog and now she’s dead,” Maj. Gen. Rafiq Shahadah allegedly told the group. “Let the Americans help her now.”

These are among the dramatic details revealed in sworn documents unsealed Monday on the orders of U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson in a civil case against the Syrian government on behalf of Colvin’s sister and heirs.

The Syrian government has never responded in court to the lawsuit, filed in July 2016. But a government spokesman, Mohammed Ramez Turgeman, earlier told The Post the suit “is false by all standards and is certainly not true.”

Lawyers are asking the judge for a default judgment. The judge must decide whether to hold a trial without a jury but with live testimony, or only use the hundreds of documents submitted by the plaintiffs’ attorneys, which include accounts from Syrian government defectors and government records purloined from the offices of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s security services.

If Jackson ultimately rules in the plaintiffs’ favor, which could take months, she would also award damages. The U.S. government holds millions of dollars in frozen Syrian assets, which she could tap as restitution.

Colvin, 56, who was working for the Sunday Times of London, was renowned for her fearless reporting in war zones and recognizable by the black eye patch she wore after losing an eye from the blast of a Sri Lankan army rocket-propelled grenade

years earlier. [Times photographer Paul Conroy](#), who was severely injured in the attack that killed Colvin, has written a book about their final hours together.

The unusual insider accounts and records, which include never-before-seen details of Syria's military and intelligence command and control, and how it was used to target civilians, were obtained by the Center for Justice and Accountability, an independent group that filed the lawsuit on behalf of Colvin's family.

The San Francisco-based group includes war crimes investigators and lawyers who organized and trained Syrian students, researchers, activists and lawyers to find and extract government records for use in prosecuting Assad and others for their actions during the seven-year civil war.

A former Syrian intelligence officer code-named "Ulysses," who says he witnessed the general's post-assassination celebration, said he also watched as a low-level female informant showed intelligence officials on a map where the media center was.

While it was not possible to independently verify Ulysses's account, the fact that he is being debriefed by security agencies overseas suggests they believe he is credible.

Ulysses also described internal, secondhand conversations indicating that the death of [French journalist Gilles Jacquier](#) the month before Colvin's was also a premeditated assassination.

The government brought Arab League observers and foreign journalists near a staged mortar attack it pinned on rebel forces, Ulysses recounts in his statement. As Jacquier rushed around covering its aftermath, he was accompanied by an undercover intelligence officer who guided him to a predetermined location at a prearranged time. Jacquier was then targeted by government forces and injured by mortar rounds.

According to Ulysses, Wael Salamah, a pimp working with paramilitary forces, was at the ready nearby. He put Jacquier in a taxi instead of an ambulance and stayed with him to make sure he died.

"Salamah's preplanned role was to make sure Jacquier did not survive and he did not," said Ulysses, who has been given refuge in a third country and debriefed by multiple security agencies. "The government then circulated a fabricated story that rebel forces had killed him."

In Colvin's assassination, Ulysses said, the government used both traditional electronic intercepts and a mobile satellite tracking device mounted on a vehicle that drove around the Baba Amr neighborhood, homing in on Colvin's whereabouts before the attack.

Another defector, Abdel Majid Barakat, who describes himself as an intelligence officer with access to daily field reports and notes from Assad at high-level security meetings, said Syrian officials unsuccessfully tried to pressure an Arab League observer with access to the media center to tell them exactly where it was.

Barakat also made clear that Assad considered media activists who made YouTube videos of the situation on the ground and helped foreign journalists surreptitiously report from inside the country “the greatest threat to the regime,” more dangerous even than protesters. Shutting them down was one of his top priorities. More than 100 journalists, most of them Syrian, have been killed in Syria since the war began.

In one of Colvin’s last broadcasts, she invited viewers to watch with her as a 2-year-old died in a basement from shrapnel wounds. The regime’s claim it was only targeting combatants was “a complete and utter lie,” Colvin told CNN’s Anderson Cooper in her last broadcast before she was killed. “The Syrian army is simply shelling a city of cold and starving civilians.”

 **2 Comments**

Dana Priest, a reporter at The Washington Post for 30 years, covers national security issues. Recently, she has investigated Russian disinformation operations, censorship around the world, the massive national security state, CIA operations and veterans issues. She is the Knight Chair in Public Affairs Journalism at the University of Maryland.  Follow @danapriest

Share news tips with us confidentially

Do you have information the public should know? Here are some ways you can securely send information and documents to Post journalists.

[Learn more](#)